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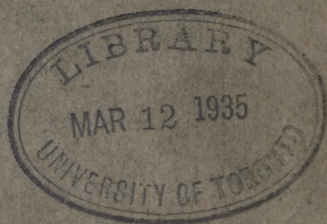
Pamphlet No. 50

The Light Reading of our  
Ancestors

By

The Right Hon. Lord Ernle, M.V.O.

President, 1921



November, 1921



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THIS pamphlet is the Presidential Address which was spoken by the Right Hon. Lord Ernle, M.V.O., at the Annual General Meeting on May 27.



## THE LIGHT READING OF OUR ANCESTORS

I WISH that I could indeed claim to know, as the Chairman has suggested, 'all about' the subject on which I am going to talk to you this afternoon. But alas! my life has been too busily spent in other fields to gain anything approaching to that knowledge. I can only say this. It is nearly forty years ago that I wrote an article bearing the same title as that of my lecture here this afternoon, and that the subject has been one of my hobbies ever since.

The light reading of our ancestors, or of any one generation, is very often the heavy reading of the next. I am sure that that is true of the great mass of the fictitious narratives in prose or in verse which were composed for the entertainment of our medieval and Tudor ancestors. As literature, there is, comparatively speaking, little of it which can be read with pleasure. But on the other hand, as stages in the growth of the novel and of the historical romance as well as for a hundred and one other reasons, the old romances must possess, I think, an enduring interest. The art of the story-teller is as ancient as time itself. The simple tellers of tales of wonder, of tradition, of legend, of old wives' tales, and fables, which passed from lip to lip with all the freshness of oral transmission, were the remote ancestors of our contemporary novelists. It was upon their material that the first writers of fictitious narratives tried their prentice hands, adapting their forms to the changing needs of society. Generation after generation has elaborated the instrument, adding new notes, enlarging its range and its compass. All these experiments in forms and methods of literary expression, our contemporary masters and mistresses of fiction have inherited. They can claim a remote lineage. They were born in one of the seven cities which claim the honour of Homer's birthplace. They were nourished and taught their letters by French nurses; they were attended by Arabian physicians; they were schooled by wise men from the East; they were tutored by Italian and Spanish masters. They began their career as minstrels in the halls of the great, or as wandering preachers to the poor in open streets and ale-houses, before they settled down to photograph or etch or paint their pictures of real life, or to chronicle the impossibilities of their Kingdoms of Nowhere. To put the point metaphorically, we may say that the river of fiction to-day pours itself in ever-increasing volume into the ocean of print. It has travelled far from its original



fountain-head. It has left behind it the green giants and knight-errants and dragons and enchantments of medieval romance. It has emerged from the forest in which Robin Hood and Friar Tuck plied their adventurous trade. It has passed beyond the borders of Arcadia where princes and princesses masqueraded as shepherds and shepherdesses. No Italian castles now stand upon its bank echoing with the mysterious footfalls of monastic villains. The atmosphere of scented moonshine in which Edwin and Angelina vowed eternal constancy is dispelled by the broad light of day. The river of fiction has reached the level plain of ordinary life. It flows among familiar fields, through the hearts of great cities. In the rapid rush of its more adventurous career, it had no leisure to mirror the inner workings of the human mind or the morals and manners of society. All these to-day are faithfully reflected in its broad, slow-moving and sometimes muddy stream. Yet, I think the scenery of its upper waters must always possess a fascination for the lovers of the picturesque in literary history. It is there that I want to take you this afternoon.

The first point I would like to make to you is, that it was at a very different stage of literary history that romantic fiction was developed among the states of Greece and Italy on the one hand and among the nations of northern Europe on the other. The golden age of Athens or of Rome knew nothing of novelists or romancers. Before their birth, the language of both countries had been matured; their literary style perfected; their finest literature created. It was not that materials were wanting. Imagination flowed in other channels, and society made no demand for that particular form of entertainment. In the crowded days of their glory, the Greek cities or the Roman Republic had little leisure and less privacy. Political and civic interests absorbed the energies of the people. They lived an open-air life. Public disputations, spectacular shows, dramatic representations gave them the recreation for which they asked. Romantic fiction grew out of the decay of liberty and the degeneracy of literature. It was not till public activities were suppressed by a suspicious government—it was not till the sacred flame of the passion of liberty was burning low—it was not till society, losing its old interests and ideals, grew more leisured and more private, that the imagination of Africa and Asiatic Greece found new forms of literary expression in the ideal extravagances of romance. Quite different has been its fate among the peoples of France and Norman England. Their literary history begins, instead of ending, with romance. In the dreary sands of metrical romance, under the later Byzantine Empire, the splendid stream of the imaginative literature of Greece was lost and disappeared.



On the other hand, in the profane vernacular literature of France, the earliest example is the metrical romance of *Roland*, and in our own profane literature the first English prose work which really lives to-day is the prose romance of Sir Thomas Malory, the *Morte d'Arthur*. So it is that in our own country and in that of France, romantic fiction is not the child of decrepitude; it is the first-born of youth. Neither here nor in France did it wait for the decay of liberty or the degeneracy of literature; on the contrary, it accompanied and fostered the progress and expansion of both. It did not tarry till the language was matured and style perfected; on the contrary, it was one of the first exercises in which the English tongue was trained to literary expression and in which the standard of prose style was elaborated. Hardly any of the circumstances or conditions which checked its growth in Greece and Italy, prevailed in this country. Romance here had no serious rival in political or civic interests. Dramatic representations hardly existed. The rigour of a northern climate prohibited the open-air life of the cities of southern Italy or of Asiatic Greece. It enforced longer hours of comparative leisure, which had to be spent within doors in such privacy and seclusion as the Middle Ages allowed. Amusements were few; social intercourse was rare. The mind of the nation too was in the childlike stage—credulous, athirst for tales of wonder and of incident. In their monotonous isolation, splendid or squalid according to their means, and weary of one another's company, men welcomed the arrival of some professional wayfarer. The palmer with his licensed exaggeration, the friar with his tales of the saints outwitting the devil, the juggler, the pedlar, the itinerant drug-seller were welcomed as distractions. They were the newspapers of the day, purveyors of rumours, carriers of gossip, transmitters, too, of not a few new thoughts and fresh ideas. And, above all, perhaps, the minstrel supplied a social need. He was the circulating library when as yet there was no circle of readers. He was not only the medieval Mudie; he was also the medieval publisher. As he drew his bow across his viol, or swept the strings of his harp, and in droning chant prayed audience for some romance of chivalry, the boastings and bickerings of the common hall were silenced and the rude roar of the market-place was hushed. He introduced all over England the works of the great troubadours of the day.

As in the heroic age, so in the age of chivalry, there was leisure. In both it was filled by the art of the minstrel. But, at the end of the eleventh century—it is a long way back—when France assumed her domination over the vernacular literatures of Europe, a new world was in the making. The old literary records could not meet the changed



needs. More was wanted than the existing *chansons de geste*, those songs of feats of arms which centre round Charlemagne and his paladins and tell the deeds of Frenchmen. They stand by themselves, a curious literature with a very special value of its own. Its huge bulk is not generally realized. If you take only those songs that were in existence before the close of the twelfth century, the number of lines that they contain is twenty times the number of lines contained in the whole of the *Iliad*. But they belonged to the passing world and not to the world that was in the making. In form and in character, they are totally different from the later romances of chivalry. History is their background; legendary belief is their substance. Their prodigies of valour may be incredible. Charlemagne may, like Joshua, make the sun stand still; his sword, like that of Roland, may be invincible. Yet, in spite of these and similar marvels, they do create a vivid impression of something which is true to life. They paint for us a lawless, ferocious, pious race, living in a rude simple stage of society. There are no arts, no refinements. Religion is elementary; love is an animal instinct. Hunting is not only a relaxation, but a necessity. War is the business of life. It is true that in the songs of feats of arms, the motive for the fighting is already more impersonal and more complicated than that of epic poetry. It is true that in them men fought for ideas—for the Cross, for France, for their oath of fealty. But apart from that change, the old *chansons de geste* are far more akin to epic poetry than they are to romances of chivalry. They stand apart as survivals of a stage of society, of a phase of national life and history, of a type of national character, which are already extinct. Travellers—and some of you may have been among them—through the rich, smiling, highly cultivated fields of France must have been arrested sometimes by the sight of some dark monolith rising in their midst, a grim sentinel of past civilizations. With something of the same aloofness, those songs of feats of arms stand apart from the later romances of chivalry as records of a by-gone age, stern, massive, simple. But the new world wanted more than the *chansons de geste*. Some other form of expression was required to satisfy its needs.

It is not enough, though it is true, to say that society was growing richer, more luxurious, more leisured, more refined and artistic. That is true; but it is not enough. Society was changing profoundly in form, in ideals, in thought. The old ties between followers and retainers had taken on the legal relationship of feudal lord and vassal. The old prosaic interests of life had ceased to be common enterprises; divisions of labour had multiplied; classes had been formed; conven-



tions of behaviour were introduced. Niceties of speech accentuated the differences. Though, on the one hand, they tended to transform classes into castes, they yet, on the other hand, tended to soften manners, to refine and humanize life. In this direction they were the manifestations, the expressions of the changing ideals of society. We all know in a more or less vague manner what the age of chivalry means. But it may be well that we should realize the meaning with some degree of particularity, because it enters so much into the romances of chivalry. What do we mean when we speak of the age of chivalry? Chivalry was born of the same horror of savagery and violence which inspired the earlier Peace of the King or Truce of God. Like them, it was in close alliance with religion. It aimed by wider means and methods of subtler application at similar objects. It was a generous recognition of the human tie between power and weakness. It was the code of feudalism in civil as well as in military life. It defined the rules of knightly conduct, not only in war but in peace. The young man who was admitted to the Order of Knighthood had been trained to use his weapon skilfully, to sit his horse surely, to fly his falcon and hunt the stag. But he was also trained to service, to obedience, to courtesy and reverence towards women. The ceremony on his admission was religious. The sword that was girt on his thigh was the sword of righteousness. The bathing of his body signified his purification from evil thoughts and evil deeds. He swore, and confirmed his oath on the sacraments, to abjure ease and safety, to pursue the infidel, to uphold honour in every perilous adventure. He swore also to maintain right, to speak truth, to protect women, to succour the poor and the distressed. Lamentably as the practice fell below the ideal, the ideal was invaluable. At the time when romances of chivalry were being written, it was a living force, especially when it had behind it the ecstasy of devotional feeling which inspired the Crusades and the delirium of the spirit of adventure which they in turn engendered. Nor, I think, ought we to forget that, when the sun of chivalry was set, it was its afterglow which lit up the pages of Spenser, and, if Sir Henry Newbolt will pardon me, quivered to the beat of the drum of Drake. Society then was changing in structure and in ideals; it was changing also intellectually. The great swelling under-current of new thought was gathering strength and volume. On the one side there was the insatiable curiosity, the thirst for knowledge, the craving to recover old springs, or to discover new sources, of intellectual and imaginative enjoyment. On another side, there was the dim, indefinite, unsatisfied longing for religion, with its mystical idealism and its spirit of rebellion against all the



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ugliness and harshness of the realities of life. On another side there was the growing sense of the power of the supernatural. Into the minds of medieval Europe were poured the thoughts of peoples of many civilizations other than their own. The vast influx carried with it pagan and oriental mythologies. They were irreconcilable with the Christian faith. The Bible forbade polytheism; it fostered belief in the dualism of good and evil. Passed through the crucible of an inspired revelation, the great gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome emerged as emissaries of Satan, and, as the medieval mind realized their ubiquity and their universal influence over the affairs and destinies of man, we need not wonder that their sense of the imminence of the diabolic agencies deepened, and that they felt a growing horror of the witchcraft, spells, and enchantments which fell under the ban of the Church. On yet another side, the gentler powers of earth and air and water, of mountains, woods and mines, were allowed to retain their sway. They mingled with our own native superstitions to swell the charming rout of the *Midsummer-Night's Dream*.

Out of these new elements of the changed structure, ideals, and thought of Society, the literary craftsmen of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries wove their romances of chivalry to meet the new needs. They were all—it is a humiliating confession—written in Norman French. All our romantic fictions owe their existence to French originals. But the literary craftsmen who fashioned the fabrics of the three great groups of chivalrous tales owed a great part of their patronage at least to Anglo-Norman sovereigns and rulers. By the end of the thirteenth century, they had fashioned the main structure of all the three great groups of romance, on which their successors worked, elaborating, expanding, decorating. It was these romances which were the stock-in-trade of the minstrel. It is these romances which constituted, till the close of the sixteenth century, the main source of entertainment, and eventually the light reading, of our medieval and Tudor ancestors. Every literary text-book quotes with approval the famous line of Jean Bodel, the thirteenth-century troubadour, in which he divides chivalrous romances into three matters—the matter of France, the matter of Britain, the matter of Rome the great. It was the matter of France—because of the use which it made of the existing ancient material of the songs of feats of arms—which was the oldest of these three groups. The literary craftsmen who compiled romances of chivalry applied to the old songs the same methods which they subsequently applied to classical heroes like Alexander the Great, or Hector, or again to the legends of King Arthur and his Table Round. If you look at one of the romances of



chivalry which has sprung from an old *chanson de geste*, you will see revealed the new state of society for which men of letters were catering. In the first place, the old *chansons* were written entirely to be sung; the new romances of chivalry were written not only to be sung; they were written also for recitation or for reading. They were written in prose as well as in verse. The simple dignity of the *chanson* is overlaid by a riot of romantic fancy. War is now a sport, a pastime to be pursued in the capricious spirit of knight-errantry. Women have a new, an assured position. They have become the deities whose adoration inspired the wildest adventures and the fiercest encounters. Love is become a romantic passion, coloured with tenderness and gallantry, dissected with the same delicacy of observation which is to be found in its famous thirty-one rules, complicated by some of the casuistries that characterize the decisions of its yet more famous Courts. Religion plays an essential part. It opposes a Galahad to a Tristram; it contrasts with the licence of the Court the ideal of chastity and the asceticism of the cloister. The *chanson* has lost its compactness of structure. The later romances of chivalry are swollen to prodigious lengths. Incident is threaded to incident, encounter to encounter, adventure to adventure, and at every complication, either to solve or to create or to postpone the problem, is invoked the intervention of magic, or the machinations of fairies. We stand in a new world, and with its advent the literary record has changed.

I may frankly admit that the old romances of chivalry violate every canon of literary art. It is not so much that the incidents are wildly improbable or absolutely impossible. That offence might, I think, be pardoned to a generation which lived so close to the Norman Conquest. Men who had seen the son of the tanner's daughter winning a kingdom almost at a blow might well suspend their critical faculties and believe that the marvels of fiction could hardly transcend the miracles of facts. But there are other offences. They did not attempt, or rarely attempt any delineation of character. They have no unity of design. Instead of growth, they give us accretion; instead of development, they offer us accumulation of incidents. The result is that they are formless, tiresome in their repetitions, tedious from their surplusage. At the same time, they are untrue to the main facts and realities of the greater part of the life of the times. Yet they remain not only the best pictures of the manners and customs and habits and dress and food and sport of a large part of feudal society. They are, I honestly believe, true to the ideal lives which a great part of medieval society and of our



Tudor ancestors aspired to live, and true to the life which some of them, perhaps, actually lived. So it is that, with all their faults, romances of chivalry are, to my mind, one of the golden keys to the tumultuous heart of the Middle Ages. Nor is that all. The critical brain may be repelled by their monotony ; but the eye is irresistibly fascinated by the brilliancy of their variegated colouring. Over the shadowy figures of Charlemagne and his paladins, or of the heroes of classical literature and antiquity, or of King Arthur and the Table Round, the literary craftsmen have worked intricate patterns, decorated with all the quaintness of medieval imagination, embellished with rich pictorial pageants of sport, of tournaments, of fighting, of encounter and adventure, embroidered with scenes of romantic and constant love, embellished with rich scenes of feasting in magnificent halls, bright with the glitter of the gems and the variegated hues of the clothing of gay lords and ladies. The imaginative treasures of the world were ransacked to find their varied colours. Here you have some brilliant silk from the Far East. There you have some sombre skein of northern superstition. Here gold and silver threads from the classical literature of Greece or Rome. There is a tissue glowing with the lyrical passion of Provence. Here is a strand from the hair shirt of some cloistered penitent. It is not as literature that I would look upon them ; it is as a gorgeous tapestry set in the highly decorative framework of medieval chivalry. The influence which these romances exercised upon the national life of this country was prodigious. We cannot exaggerate it. They had no rivals in newspapers ; with the exception of a very small number of persons, they had no competitors in the shape of schools or colleges. They coloured the medieval and Tudor conception of history and biography, of science, of geography, of natural history. They opened to the unlearned the treasures of classical literature. They helped to sweep us with the Latin nations into the movement of the early Renaissance. They fostered imagination and stimulated discovery by their mythical pictures of the wonders of the Far East. They were powerful popular preachers. Many a soul, I can imagine, tortured by the conflict of dogmas, turned with comfort to the simple creed which Roland expounds to the giant whom he wishes to convert. They elevated the manners, they inspired the ideals, they fired the enthusiasm of successive generations. They have enriched the popular currency of our thought by characters who live as typical representatives of vices or virtues. Their influence appears in unexpected places. Their scenes and their actors are painted on the walls of castle or of monastery or of



convent. They are carved on panels, on doors, and on the capitals of pillars. They are traced on the compartments of treasure chests. They are woven into historical tapestries. They are preserved in the names of features of national scenery all over Northern Europe. On their manuscripts are lavished all the skill of the illuminator and binder. They appear among the choicest bequests in the wills of mediæval and Tudor times. They figure in the catalogues of monastic libraries. They form part of the book collections of all sorts and conditions of men and women, from Mary Queen of Scots to Thomas Cox of Coventry. They were the principal products of our printing presses. Protests against their influence have created a literature to which Rabelais and Cervantes did not disdain to contribute. They have kindled the imaginations of our men of letters. Even Chaucer, though he caricatured them, was steeped to the lips with their perusal; when sleep flitted from his eyes, it was to a romance that he turned for rest. It was from the romances that Shakespeare and Spenser and a long line of poets, down to Tennyson and Morris, have quarried some of their richest treasures.

The three groups of romances influenced England in very different degrees. Naturally enough, perhaps, the matter of France—the stories of Charlemagne and his paladins—were the least popular. It was, probably, not to the liking of English audiences to celebrate the praise of French knights. We owe to this group of romances three principal debts. We owe to them the proverb—what it means the learned still discuss—‘A Roland for an Oliver’. We owe to them in Ganelon the representative of treason who sits in literature by the side of the betrayer of our Lord. We owe to them, above all, in Huon of Bordeaux, the creation of Oberon. It is a curious example of the methods of the old romancers in linking up the three groups of romance that the Fairy King is the son of Morgan le Fay by Julius Caesar. It was, you will remember, Huon’s enterprise to pluck a hair from the great Cham’s beard.

If you turn to the classical group, it is impossible to exaggerate the immensity of its contemporary influence. It has not, of course, survived the advent of modern scholarship. And yet it lives. At the time, it made the names of Jason and Helen, of Hector, or of Alexander the Great, household words in the minds of the English people, more familiar than they have been at any subsequent period. It turned the sympathies of the English world entirely in favour of the Trojans. We can still see its influence, for instance, in Shakespeare. But its most prominent contribution to literature is the episode of Troilus and Cressida, upon which Boccaccio and Chaucer and



Henryson and Shakespeare successively seized. The incident is originally taken from the great *Roman de Troie* of Benoît de Sainte-More, which is a work that itself contains something like three times the number of lines in the whole of the *Iliad*.

There remains the third group. That is the group which is, I hope, familiar to every one of you. It is the group which tells the story of King Arthur and the Table Round. Its scenery is for the most part laid in this country, and in England it was amazingly popular, as we know from the number of versions in the vernacular tongue. It was also of world-wide popularity. I need hardly remind you how Dante tells us that the story of Lancelot had reached the far-off walls of Rimini. Who wrote the original story, on what legends it was founded, by whose hands it was fashioned and expanded, are questions which bristle with controversies. Any one who would speak with convincing authority upon the origins of King Arthur and the Table Round must, I think, have spent the age of Methuselah in their study. He must be a Mezzofanti in his knowledge of dialects and languages; he must be a palaeographer, a philologist, the master of at least half a score of kindred sciences. Even so equipped, he is a bold man and a hardy who would even try to force the Way Perilous, so dour and hard-bitten are the warriors who guard its critical passages. I will attempt a humbler task and a safer course. I will take the story as it was left by Sir Thomas Malory—as it was left in 1470. Probably it was partly patriotism, probably it was partly religion, that led Malory to choose this group of the medieval romances of chivalry. Partly also, it was the true instinct of literary genius, for it is the one group which has in it the enduring elements of vitality. It is the one group through which there seems to run some sort of common purpose, a plot which is worked out through the search for the Holy Grail and the sin of Lancelot. It is, again, the one group in which the actors, or some of them, are real human beings. It is also the group in which is retained a larger measure of those essential qualities of immortality which in the other groups have evaporated in the manipulation of literary men of business. Those shadowy legends, on which the imaginative idealistic Celt has brooded have preserved that sense of mystery, that aspiration, that emotional suggestion, that touch of strangeness which to all of us are the soul and essence of real romance. And, once again, it is this group alone which yields us the inward and spiritual meanings, the capacity for allegorical interpretation, the mystical symbolisms, which are living, lasting influences because successive generations can appropriate them to their special needs



and varying circumstances. The book was finished in 1470. Why had we to wait till 1742 for the first realistic novel? Why had we to wait till 1814 for the first historical romance that still holds the field? Perhaps our wonder will be the greater if we realize something of the ease, the freshness, the simplicity, the delicacy of the prose in which Sir Thomas Malory wrote his great romance. Let me read you one passage. You may know it by heart. I may murder it. Yet I can think of no better conclusion to these few imperfect remarks on the romances of chivalry. The scene is after King Arthur has died, after the Table Round is broken up and dispersed, after the Queen has taken refuge in the nunnery at Amesbury. There Lancelot seeks her out. He is standing in the cloister when she sees him.

‘When she sees him she swoons thrice, that all the ladies and gentlemen had work enough to hold up the queen. So when she might speak, she called ladies and gentlemen to her and said: Ye marvel, fair ladies, why I make this fare. Truly, she said, it is for the sight of yonder knight that yonder standeth: Wherefore, I pray you all, call him to me. When Sir Launcelot was brought to her, then she said to all the ladies: Through this man and me hath all this War been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain. Therefore, Sir Launcelot, wit thou well I am set in such a plight to get my soul’s health; and yet I trust through God’s grace, that after my death to have a sight of the blessed face of Christ and at doomsday to sit on his right side, for as sinful as ever I was are saints in heaven. Therefore, Sir Launcelot, I require thee and beseech thee heartily, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, that thou never see me more in the visage; and I command thee on God’s behalf, that thou forsake my company, and to thy kingdom thou turn again and keep well thy realm from war and wrack. For as well as I have loved thee, mine heart will not serve to see thee; for through thee and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed. Therefore, Sir Launcelot, go to thy realm, and there take thee a wife, and live with her with joy and bliss, and I pray thee heartily pray for me to our Lord, that I may amend my mis-living.’

The man who, in the middle of the fifteenth century, could write that passage, throbbing with a woman’s passion, a woman’s remorse, and a woman’s highest self-surrender, might well have founded a new branch of literature, and become, without the intervention of centuries, the parent of our modern fiction—whether it is the novel or the romance. That he left no immediate heir is one of the puzzling facts of literary history.















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